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ABSTRACT

Past and present family relationships of a sample of 40 women who were in treatment for childhood experiences of incest were examined. The majority of the women viewed their families-of-origin as generally unhealthy in regard to various dimensions of autonomy and intimacy. Current relationships with families-of-origin were characterized by less intimacy and more intimidation, triangulation, and fusion than in a normed group. Some of these patterns were also evident in the families-of-procreation of the women. The subjects perceived their families-of-procreation as disengaged, controlling, less active in events outside the family, conflict-ridden, and lacking in organization and emotional expressiveness. As measured by a circumplex model, a significant number of families-of-procreation were in the extreme range of family functioning. It is concluded that results shed light on the potential dysfunctional interaction patterns of incestuous families and the tendency of such patterns to be transmitted across generations. (Author/RH)

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Family-of-Origin Characteristics and Current Family Relationships of Female Adult Incest Victims

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Abstract

Past and present family relationships of a group of female adult incest victims were examined. The sample consisted of 40 women who were, at the time of assessment, in treatment for childhood experiences of incest. The majority of these women viewed their families-of-origin as generally unhealthy in regard to various dimensions of autonomy and intimacy. Current relationships with their families-of-origin were characterized by less intimacy and more intimidation, triangulation, and fusion than a normed group. Some of these patterns were also evident in the families-of-procreation of these women, including greater triangulation and less spousal intimacy. The subjects also perceived their families-of-procreation as disengaged, controlling, less active in events outside the family, conflict-ridden, and lacking in organization and emotional expressiveness. Finally, based on a circumplex model, a significant number of families-of-procreation were in the extreme range of family functioning.

Aims/Objectives

The purpose of this study was to investigate the current relationships of adult female incest victims with family-of-origin and family-of-procreation members and their retrospective perceptions of their family-of-origin. We predicted that incest victims' perceptions of past and present family relationships would be significantly different from various normed groups on a number of variables, including dimensions of family cohesion and adaptability, social participation and emotional expressiveness in their family-of-procreation, general family health of their family-of-origin, and triangulation and intimidation in the three-generational system. Our general expectation was that the results

would support the notion that some of the patterns in incestuous families and trauma associated with victimization become manifest in the victim's family-of-procreation. Several hypotheses were tested.

Method

Subjects

The sample consisted of 40 women from a metropolitan area in the Upper Midwest who were currently in treatment for childhood and/or adolescent experiences of incest. The length of time in treatment of subjects ranged from 1 month to 8 years. The women ranged in age from 20 to 57 years ($\underline{M}$=33.9). Birth-order of the subjects in their family-of-origin was almost equally distributed (i.e., oldest, middle, and youngest child). Most of the women were Caucasian (92.5%). Fifteen of them were currently married (37.5%), while the remainder were single/never married (32.5%), separated (5%), divorced (20%), widowed (2.5%) or co-habitating (2.5%). Fourteen of the subjects had no children, 13 had one or two children, and 13 had three or more children. More than three-fourths of these women (81%) were at the low (under $10,000 per year) and lower-middle ($10,000-$20,000 per year) levels of income. Less than one-third of them (28%) had a college, graduate, or professional degree. The majority of the sample was either Protestant (45%) or Catholic (40%).

Along with the collection of basic demographic information, subjects were asked various questions regarding their particular experiences of incest during their first 18 years. While all of the women reported incidences of incestuous victimization, 18 (48%) also indicated that they had been physically abused, 32 (80%) psychologically abused, and 14

(35%) emotionally neglected by at least one parent. The reported age of onset of incest ranged from infancy to 13 years, and the average duration of the incest was 9.86 years. In terms of frequency of the incest, 20 (50%) of the subjects reported that the abuse occurred at least once a week, 8 women (20%) at least once a month, 4 women (10%) two or three times a year, and 8 women (20%) only two or three times total. Seventeen women reported living in an urban area at the time of the abuse and 23 in a rural area or on a farm at the time of the abuse.

Perpetrators by relationship to the victim varied, and a significant number (n=26) of women reported that they had been victimized by more than one perpetrator. The most common perpetrators were brothers (57.5% of the sample), fathers (32.5%), uncles (32.5%), cousins (22.5%), step-fathers (10%), grandfathers (7.5%), mothers (7.5%), and "live-ins" with the custodial parent (7.5%). Thirteen women had also been abused by a non-family member during childhood or adolescence (32.5% of the sample).

Subjects were also asked if there was a problem with alcohol use, alcohol abuse, or chemical dependency in their family-of-origin during their childhood or adolescent years. Alcohol abuse or chemical dependency of a father or step-father was reported to be an issue in the lives of 28 (70%) of the subjects. Nine subjects (22.5%) reported that substance abuse had been a problem for a mother or step-mother, 23 (57.5%) for a brother or step-brother, 12 (30%) for a sister or step-sister, and 17 (42.5%) for at least one grandparent.

A question concerning subjects' current contact with parents was also asked. Fourteen fathers and 9 mothers were deceased. However, 20 of the subjects maintained

contact with their living parent(s) on at least a weekly basis. Fifteen women were in contact at least monthly, and 5 reported having little if any contact with their parent(s).

Procedures

All of the women in this study (N = 40) were currently in therapy groups for incest victims. Potential subjects were informed by their therapists that the study would examine the perceived level of functioning in their family-of-origin, current relationships with members of their family-of-origin, and for those subjects who had one or more children (n=26), current relationships with family-of-procreation members. Consent forms were distributed to potential participants by their therapists, along with various standardized measures and a demographic questionnaire which included various questions about the incest. Subjects were asked to return the completed scales and questionnaires within 7 to 10 days after receiving them. They were given $5.00 in compensation for their time (approximately 1 1/2 hours) upon the return of the completed forms and scales to their therapists.

For the purpose of this study, Finkelhor's (1978) definition of incest was used to identify and confirm subjects as incest victims. Since incest was defined as sexual experiences between immediate or extended family members (biological or by marriage), including sexual propositions, exhibition, sexual fondling, hand-genital or oral-genital contact, mutual masturbation or intercourse. Family-of-origin referred to the family into which subjects were born or reared during the majority of their first 18 years of life. Family-of-procreation was defined as a current dual- or single-parenting situation in which

the incest victim was residing, or a step-family environment that included at least one of the victim's biological children.

Measures

The measures used in this study were selected because they allowed for a valid and reliable assessment of family-of-origin and family-of-procreation characteristics and relationships. A measure of psychological adjustment was also included so that subjects' scores could be compared with normative group data. Family of procreation measures included the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales III (FACES III) (Olson, Portner, & Lavee, 1985, 1987) and the Family Environment Scale (FES) (Moos & Moos, 1986, 1987). The Family-of-Origin Scale (FOS) (Hovestadt, Anderson, Piercy, Cochran, & Fine, 1985) was used to assess retrospective perceptions of subjects' family-of-origin, whereas the Personal Authority in Family Systems Questionnaire (PAFS-Q) (Bray, Williamson, & Malone, 1984a, 1984b) was used to measure subjects' current relationships with family members in the three generational family system. Individual adjustment was assessed by the Psychological Screening Inventory (PSI; Lanyon, 1978).

Results

Seven hypotheses were tested in this study. In testing the first four hypotheses, only those participants who had a family-of-procreation (i.e., currently married or single with at least one child) were included in the analyses ($n=26$). The entire sample ($N = 40$) was included in the testing of the last three hypotheses.

It was first predicted that a significantly greater number of subjects' cohesion scores on FACES III (families-of-procreation) would fall into the enmeshed category as compared to the separated, connected, or disengaged categories. Hypothesis 1 was not supported. A chi-square analysis revealed that there were not a significantly greater number of scores in the enmeshed category than the other three. It was found, however, that 16 of 25 scores (64%) fell in the disengaged category, 4 (16%) in the separated category, 3 (12%) in the connected category, and 2 (8%) in the enmeshed category, resulting in a significant chi-square value [X2 (3, $n = 25$) = 25.45, $p < .001$].

It was secondly predicted that a significantly greater number of subjects' scores would cluster into the rigid category of adaptability on FACES III than the structured, flexible, or chaotic categories. A chi-square analysis indicated no significant differences between category frequencies [X2 (3, $n = 25$) = 1.08, $p < .782$]. Therefore, the second hypothesis was not supported. There were 5 (20%) in the flexible category, 7 (28%) in the structrued category, 5 (20%) in the flexible category, and 8 (32%) in the chaotic category.

Distance From Center (DFC) scores were also calculated for the sample, and subjects' families-of-procreation were grouped in either the balanced, mid-range, or extreme categories of family functioning based on the Circumplex Model of Olson et al. (1985). Chi-square analyses indicated that 13 scores were in the extreme range, 9 in the mid-range, and 3 in the balanced range [X2 (2, $n = 25$) = 6.08, $p < .05$]. The mean DFC score was 12.33, which fell well within the extreme range of family functioning.

It was next predicted that incest victims' families-of-procreation would be characterized by significantly less emphasis on participation in social activities in comparison

with the normed group as indicated by the FES. A t-test indicated that the sample group's scores on active-recreational orientation were significantly lower than those of the normed group (Table 1). Thus, the third hypothesis was supported.

It was also hypothesized that families-of-procreation of incest victims would be characterized by significantly less expressiveness in comparison with the normed group as measured by the FES. A t-test (Table 1) showed that incest victims scored their families significantly lower in expressiveness than the normed group. The fourth hypothesis was therefore accepted.

Incest sample mean scores on the FES were also significantly lower than normed group mean scores for the dimensions of intellectual/cultural orientation, cohesion, independence, and organization. Incest group mean scores on the dimensions of conflict and control were significantly higher than those of the normed group (Table 1).

It was also predicted that the perceived overall family health in families-of-origin of incest victims would be significantly lower than the normed group as measured by the FOS ($N = 40$). Incest victims' total scores were found to be significantly lower than the normed group mean total score (Table 2). Therefore, this hypothesis was supported.

Each of the subscales constituting the FOS constructs of autonomy and intimacy were also analyzed. A series of t-tests (Table 2) indicated that incest sample mean scores for each subscale were significantly lower than the mean scores for the normed group. Lower scores on each scale indicated a lower overall perceived family health in regard to autonomy and intimacy.

Next, it was predicted that the subjects' current level of intergenerational triangulation with their family-of-origin would be significantly greater than that of the normed group. As expected, the PAFS-Q yielded significantly lower scores for the incest victim sample on this dimension (Table 3), indicating a significantly higher level of triangulation than the normed group. It was finally predicted that subjects would report significantly greater levels of intergenerational intimidation than the normed group (Table 3). Hypothesis seven was therefore confirmed.

Normative mean scores for the remaining PAFS-Q scales were also compared with incest sample mean scores (Table 3). A number of *t*-tests indicated that incest victims scored significantly lower on all of the scales of the PAFS-Q, with the exception of Spousal Fusion/ Individuation.

Finally, scores for incest victims on the PSI were compared with those of the normed group on various dimensions of psychological adjustment. A series of *t*-tests indicated significantly higher incest victim scores on the alienation, social nonconformity, and discomfort scales, and significantly lower scores for incest victims' on the defensiveness scale (Table 4).

Table 1

Results of t tests Comparing Incest Victims

with the Normed Group on the FES

Subscale	Normative Sample[a]		Incest Victim Sample[b]			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	df	t
Cohesion	6.61	1.36	4.38	3.25	25	3.49**
Expressiveness	5.45	1.55	4.08	2.68	25	2.60*
Conflict	3.31	1.85	5.00	2.15	25	3.97***
Independence	6.61	1.19	5.15	2.29	25	3.24**
Achievement Orientation	5.47	1.61	5.54	1.92	25	.18
Intellectual-Cultural Orientation	5.63	1.72	3.65	2.86	25	3.52**
Active-Recreational Orientation	5.35	1.87	3.76	2.39	25	3.37***
Moral-Religious Emphasis Orientation	4.72	1.98	4.35	1.50	25	1.23
Organization	5.41	1.83	3.65	2.38	25	3.75***
Control	4.34	1.81	5.31	2.22	25	2.21*

[a] $N = 1,125$

[b] $N = 26$

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$

***$p < .001$

Table 2

Results of t tests Comparing Incest Victims

with the Normed Group on the FOS

	Normative Sample[a]		Incest Victim Sample[b]			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	df	t
Total Score	149.36	26.07	84.33	27.82	39	12.72***
Subscales:						
Clarity of Expression	14.61	3.04	7.83	3.10	39	11.76***
Responsibility	14.21	2.93	8.67	3.14	39	9.02***
Respect for Others	14.95	3.36	7.88	3.07	39	11.98***
Acceptance of Separation and Loss	14.43	3.78	8.60	4.11	39	10.32***
Range of Feelings	15.10	3.33	7.55	3.62	39	11.40***
Mood and Tone	16.56	3.38	9.42	4.30	39	9.39***
Conflict Resolution	14.12	3.26	7.40	3.51	39	10.44***
Empathy	15.09	3.16	8.68	3.38	39	10.76***
Trust	15.56	2.93	10.15	4.07	39	7.65***

[a] $N = 100$

[b] $N = 40$

*** $p < .001$

Table 3

Results of t tests Comparing Incest Victims

with the Normed Group on the PAFS-Q

	Normative Sample[a]		Incest Victim Sample[b]			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	df	t
Spousal Intimacy	45.15	8.18	36.19	12.80	35	4.36***
Spousal Fusion/ Triangulation	64.64	8.39	65.19	8.07	35	.42
Nuclear Family Triangulation	38.16	5.45	34.75	6.41	23	3.28**
Intergenerational Intimacy	93.65	17.30	74.73	18.85	39	6.15***
Intergenerational Fusion/ Individual	29.53	5.25	20.55	4.64	39	11.68***
Intergenerational Triangulation	27.05	11.70	23.88	8.12	38	2.30*
Intergenerational Intimidation	98.55	24.87	89.40	25.26	39	2.21*
Personal Authority	42.13	8.03	30.70	6.98	39	9.87***

[a] N = 525

[b] N = 40

*p < .05

**p < .01

***p < .001

Table 4

Results of t tests Comparing Incest Victims

with the Normed Group on the PSI

Subscale	Normative Sample[a] Mean	SD	Incest Victim Sample[b] Mean	SD	df	t
Alienation	5.95	2.97	10.33	4.19	39	6.48***
Social Nonconformity	6.54	3.74	9.7	4.43	39	4.39***
Discomfort	11.09	5.57	18.17	5.89	39	7.35***
Expression	10.64	4.83	10.55	3.23	39	.16
Defensiveness	11.66	2.27	9.95	2.26	39	4.60***

[a] $N = 500$

[b] $N = 40$

***$p < .001$

Conclusions

1. Overall, subjects' FOS scores indicated that they generally perceived their families-of-origin to be lacking in support for autonomy and intimacy within the family system.

2. There is also some evidence from this study that subjects' relationships with both parents and children were in many cases highly stressful and problematic (PAFS-Q).

3. Most of the women in this study did not evaluate their own families as emotionally close and cohesive (FACES III and FES results).

4. Since incest victims scored significantly higher in the areas of alienation, social nonconformity, and emotional discomfort (PSI), they may have lacked some of the socially appropriate behaviors and emotional stability that could have enhanced their current relationships with both family-of-origin and family-of-procreation members.

5. The results of this study shed light on the potential dysfunctional interaction patterns in incestuous families and their tendency to get passed down transgenerationally.